

Beauty Is Almost Taboo

Sophie Whettnall and Emiliano Battista in conversation with Carine Fol

Emiliano: Carine, what drew you to the idea of curating a show of Sophie's work?

Carine: Well, there is the fact that one of our missions at CENTRALE for contemporary art is to support and sponsor artists based in Brussels, and, more to the point, there is the fact that I have always been drawn to Sophie's work, which has an aesthetic dimension that I find intriguing and provocative. Her oeuvre is very personal, but also universal, even cosmic. Also, I think Sophie has a particular gift for working with spaces, for integrating her work into the space where it is being shown in such a way that it transforms the space from a mere receptacle into an element of the work itself. That kind of dialogue with the exhibition space is always very interesting for a curator, and of course for the artist: it allows me as the curator to see the space in a new way, and it allows the artist to see her work in a new light. CENTRALE is in fact a very peculiar space: originally an electric power plant, it has an architecture that isn't easy to work with. But I had a feeling that Sophie would be able to imagine a beautiful and thought-provoking dialogue with the space and its architecture. For me, an exhibition has to be something more than a showing of works ranged side by side, something more than a retrospective. I always approach an exhibition as a purposive arrangement, as a dialogue between the selected pieces and between those pieces and the space. A show must tell a story, must trace a path through the work, and that means of course being conscious of the fact that the story this show tells is one among many possible stories that could be told. The key is to find that story and tell it well, rather than trying to do fifteen different things at once. My own sense is that Sophie and I succeeded. Bookending the exhibition are two video works, which have a dynamic and thematic of their own. In between are the installations – the kites hanging from above like stars, the icebergs in a heap on the floor, and the forest just beyond them – conceived especially for the show. Adding yet another layer to the whole is the selection of paintings, prints and ink drawings by Etel Adnan.

Emiliano: What do you mean when you speak about the aesthetic dimension of Sophie's work? Do you mean that it is beautiful, maybe?

Sophie: Beauty is almost taboo in contemporary art.

Carine: That's true, as if beauty were a kind of compromise with the bourgeoisie, which wants to be pleased but not questioned or disturbed by art. Hence the idea that beauty short-circuits or obscures the work's message: if it is beautiful, there must be nothing more behind it. I don't share that view at all. And I think Sophie's work shows that work can be beautiful without being reducible to that quality alone. There's a reflection in the work that is more wide-ranging and philosophical than the beauty of its manifestations. The taboo on beauty, the idea that beauty obscures the message or blunts the force of the work, is very narrow. The aesthetic dimension of Sophie's work for me has to do with this attention to beauty, which in her hands is a way to open up, or to raise, a whole host of issues and questions.

Emiliano: Shunning beauty imposes on the viewer the question 'Why am I here looking at this?'

Sophie: Even more, it imposes the question 'What am I to understand?' It leaves no alternative ways to engage with the work other than to think that it must be very meaningful and profound.

Carine: The idea that beauty, because it is seductive, closes off the questioning of everything beyond what is there on the surface is very limiting. There's a risk that it will do that, certainly. But it's also entirely possible that the opposite is the case, that the initial seduction is precisely what makes the viewer want to dig deeper, and that without that initial seduction the viewer might not even bother. But I'd be interested to know what Sophie thinks of this and of its relation to her work.

Sophie: I do play with that a lot, and deliberately so. In my work I deal with a lot of things that are hard, difficult and violent. The way I am able to deal with those things, including on a personal level, is to court this beauty, to flirt with it. That's how I'm able to deal with reality, and that's the entry point that my work gives to the questions that it raises. This was certainly the case with my most recent video, the working title of which is *Transmission*, and which is being shown in this exhibition for the first time. It was a very difficult work to make, both emotionally and psychologically. The video features my mother, myself and my daughter, and I really went overboard with the aesthetic elements: the framing, the lighting, the glitter. It's over the top, and it looks beautiful – at least, that's what I tried to achieve! But on the soundtrack you hear my mother say a lot of things that are hard to hear. I need that contrast. To speak about violence – physical violence, as in *Shadow Boxing*, or psychological violence, as in *Transmission* – I need beauty. Not because beauty softens the violence. Personally, I think it deepens it and makes it seem as brutal as it is, and maybe as senseless as well.

Carine: This duality is very much present in your work: beauty and violence, yin and yang, deep interiority and universality, male and female, hard and soft, sweet and savoury...

Sophie: Or the combination of an industrial scale with the meticulousness of lace. The brutalism of certain works is never too far from the delicacy of lace.

Emiliano: It seems to me that Etel Adnan's role in the show can be looked at from the perspective of this duality. But I'm curious to know how you, Carine, reacted to the idea of this inclusion, which, if I'm not mistaken, came from Sophie.

Carine: I liked it immediately, not least because I think Sophie's love for Etel's work is very telling, and including it in the show is a way to open up perspectives and readings that would have remained closed otherwise. Also, there is considerable overlap in the work of these two artists, starting with the aesthetic dimension, the beauty that neither of them shuns. When you stand in front of Etel's work, all of which is done in small format with amazingly vibrant colours, you can't help but wonder: who did this? when was it done? As you start to discover the history of that artist...

Sophie: When you read her texts...

Carine: Exactly. When you read her texts, when you consider her titles, you can't help but enter onto her wavelength and feel that here's a woman whose art and writings deal with the really fundamental themes of our existence, of our presence on earth – today, certainly, but always with an eye towards the past and towards the horizon of our possible futures. You don't just look at her art and think it's beautiful, which it certainly is: you feel moved and questioned by it. There's an exploration that begins within the frame of the work but that overflows it, or expands outwards from it. I think something like that is at the heart of Sophie's work too, which also addresses fundamental questions about our existence, our place on earth. The first time I met Sophie I mentioned to her that I had called the first show I curated at CENTRALE *Mindscales*, and I think that term captures something elemental about Sophie's work: her landscapes are almost portraits of the mind – they are mindscales. I approach art through its phenomenology, through what it produces in me, because I really believe in the idea that each viewer creates their own work. This is always true, but it is especially the case with Sophie's work because she is not closed in by a particular discourse. A lot of artists present the work in tandem with a discourse that leads us to a particular reading, a particular spot. Sophie opens a door, but she leaves what's beyond it in a fluid and undetermined state that's full of possibilities.

Emiliano: In a related vein, maybe you can say something about the title of the show, *La banquise, la forêt et les étoiles*, which can be translated, roughly, as 'Icebergs, the forest and the stars'. I think the title speaks to Sophie's fascination with landscapes, which you touched on just now, but also immediately puts us in mind of what is perhaps the most urgent political challenge of our age.

Carine: It does, yes. But when Sophie proposed the title, the first thing that struck me was the poetry of it. As I said, I think Sophie addresses the fundamental questions of existence and of our relation to the world. This includes politics, of course, but she approaches those questions through art, through poetry, and not the other way around. She doesn't subsume her art to a political cause. No doubt what I am saying here is a variation of what Sophie already mentioned in relation to violence and beauty. The title also speaks directly to the relationship with Etel's work. Visitors to the show will enter Sophie's universe and suddenly find, within it, this other presence, this other universe.

Sophie: In a way, the exhibition was conceived to stage the dialogue or the encounter between two universes. Or the presence of one universe in another.

Carine: That's right, and that deepens and multiplies the possible readings – not just the possible ways of reading Sophie's work, but also the possible ways of reading Etel's work. One term that viewers almost instinctively associate with Etel is flatness, which is key to theories of modernism in painting. Now, the pieces that Sophie and I selected for the show are all recent, and one of the things that I hope will become visible is the sculptural and almost three-dimensional aspect of Etel's images. A last thing about the title is that it has to do with Sophie's connection to the elements, which recalls to me Gaston Bachelard's writings on the poetics of fire, earth, air and water, as well as his reflections on space, particularly the idea of 'intimate immensity', which I think is essential to the show. The title suggests the unfathomable immensity of the world and the cosmos, and the show articulates an intimacy with that immensity.

Emiliano: How do you understand this intimacy?

Carine: Something that has fascinated me for quite some time already is the relationship between conscious and unconscious processes, or control and lack of control in the creative process. That's another reason why I wanted to work with Sophie: I feel that in her work we see a dissolution of the self, a letting go that she achieves through the very gestures she uses to produce the work, gestures that create an automatism through repetition. Drilling holes, for example, requires concentration, attention, but it is also a form of meditation in which the self becomes lost in the gesture and its repetition. You're there, in the moment, but precisely, and paradoxically, your concentration and attention are also the path for your absence. Intimacy for me is that. It doesn't have to do with some sort of connection with your interiority, but the sense that interiority itself is diffuse and multiple – or immense, as Bachelard says.

Sophie: The role that accident plays in the work is crucial. I'm a control freak. I would even say I'm a victim of the concepts of control and rigour. The repetition of gestures and the constraints I impose on myself and on the work are manifestations of this drive to control. Not being machines, however, we make mistakes when repeating a certain gesture. And, paradoxical as this may sound, that's what interests me. It's almost as if the practices I pursue in the name of control were really there to create the space for the mistake, the accident.

Carine: And the accident takes you to places that you might not have thought of.

Sophie: Of course, and that's the point, in a way. The key is that you have to be open to the mistake, open to following the path suddenly opened up by chance.

Emiliano: As you were speaking, I was reminded of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Joyce said he wanted to write the most realistic book ever written, but in pursuing that line as thoroughly and meticulously as he did, his book became the inverse of what he had said he wanted: *Ulysses* is realism gone mad. I myself have always been intrigued by works that pursue their own internal logic so relentlessly that they push it to its breaking point. We see a similar dynamics at work in the fact that the most rigorous subjection to discipline can express itself as its opposite – as play. Great athletes, musicians and dancers make what they do seem effortless, but they can only do that because of hours, months and years of the most rigorous discipline.

Sophie: It is through a self-imposed rigour that I find freedom in the work.

Carine: That touches on the role of the unconscious I evoked earlier. Think about how many artists – Klee, Picasso, etc. – have said that it took them years to let go, and that it was only when they found a way to let go that they were able to touch something fundamental or essential.

Emiliano: All of Sophie's work is organised around the interplay between opposing poles: limit and infinity, violence and beauty, light and shadow, and so on.

Carine: Exactly, and the different moments of the exhibition walk us through that interplay. The first thing you see – and I should say that it was Sophie who came

up with the layout of the show – is the video work *Les porteuses*, which shows African women carrying large loads on their heads. The video has a different dynamic and a totally different aesthetic from the objects – the kites, icebergs and forest – that it introduces. This creates a specific temporality, and if I might digress here, I think time is an essential element in Sophie's work. In fact, I would be interested in asking Sophie about the relationship between the work as it exists in the temporality of the studio and in the temporality of the show.

Sophie: An exhibition forces you to get out of yourself. In the studio you're inside your own head all the time. But when the work has to leave the studio, you have to rethink it: you have to take a step back and think about how it might be received. When you're working, you don't think about that, you just do the work. And the only way in which I can think about how the work might be received is in relation to the exhibition space itself, which gives me the framework that makes it possible for me to imagine relationships, juxtapositions and interrelations that may, perhaps, speak to people. In that sense, the temporality of the exhibition for me has to do with the order in which the viewer encounters the work: what is the first thing visitors will see? and the last? why? This is an exercise because, when you're in the studio working, you just don't ask yourself those questions.

Carine: The show opens with *Les porteuses*. The temporality introduced by this video is specific to the place and culture it brings into the exhibition. As I see it, the gesture of carrying has a twofold meaning: there's a practical element (to carry a load from one place to another) and a metaphorical one (the woman as the child-bearer, as the bearer of life). The decision to start with these African women is very symbolic, and the full scope of that symbolic gesture comes into focus when you reach the video work that closes the show: *Transmission*, which features Sophie's mother, Sophie, and Sophie's daughter. That video, placed at the end, introduces yet another temporality, one specific to its indeterminate and almost suspended space.

Emiliano: I think the idea of mindscape applies perfectly here. The show begins with the image of the woman as the bearer of loads and of life, and ends on the entirely different image of the woman as the bearer of a family history that she transmits.

Sophie: That juxtaposition was the starting point for me. Maybe it's important to mention that *Les porteuses* is filmed in wide shots and *Transmission* in close-ups: we start wide and finish with ourselves. That goes back to the idea of 'intimate immensity'. The really hard question was how to handle everything in between.

Carine: Sophie read and understood the space immediately. I've been at CENTRALE for six years now, and I can't tell you how many times I've had to say to artists, 'Look, that's just not going to work here.' That never happened with Sophie. That said, I'm also very much committed to the idea of CENTRALE being a sort of lab, where artists can take risks, experiment, try things out. I want of course the exhibitions to work, but there's no point in playing it safe, because then you're sure it won't work. And Sophie really treated the invitation as an opportunity to experiment, to find ways not just to show the work but for her to see her own work in different and surprising ways.

Emiliano: One last thing. The exhibition is a collaboration between two women. It opens and closes on images of women, as bearers and transmitters. And it includes of course the work of yet another woman, Etel Adnan. Can you say something about that?

Carine: What you're saying is right, but I would be cautious about reading too much into that. Sophie is a woman artist, yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean that she's a feminist artist. She doesn't subscribe to one strand of feminism or another, and her art doesn't speak for a specific cause. The images you single out are indeed of women. The women in *Les porteuses* are symbols of strength and life, but the work also shows a reality that is by no means without its violence – to come back to the dualities we discussed earlier. *Transmission* shows a different type of violence, but also a form of understanding. The videos raise issues that are of concern to women, maybe even issues that are specific to women and their condition, but I think Sophie's lens is personal and intimate. I have no doubt that one can offer a feminist reading of the choices we made, and I know that I speak for both of us when I say that we would welcome that. I would just add that other readings are also possible, and equally true to the work in general and to the exhibition in particular.